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Page 10.

"Pa-pers: Times! Ledger! Press! Rec—"

Tony

The Story of a Waif

by

Laisdell Mitchell

PHILADELPHIA
CHARLES H. BANES
1420 Chestnut Street
1894

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I

A SINGLE LIFE

"PA-PERS! Times! Ledger! Press! Record!" called a bright, happy voice near me as I wended my way through the crowded thoroughfare of Chestnut Street. So clear was it, and the names of the various daily periodicals were so plainly enunciated that my attention was attracted at once, and I stood perfectly still to look for the owner, for surely such a newsboy was an anomaly.

On the curb of the sidewalk I saw him, glancing hurriedly this way and that, while full and clear, above the confused noises of the street, rose his cry:

"Pa-pers! Times! Ledger! Press! Re—" but the last word was suddenly cut short, and to my horror I saw the bright face looking upward from beneath the hoofs of a passing team of spirited horses.

Hastily springing forward to prevent them from crushing out the young life, I started toward him, but before I had reached the point, they had passed, and there in the street lay the lad. Almost miraculously he had been preserved from instant death by the wheels of the carriage passing on either side of him.

As I tenderly raised the slight form, upon

which were no visible marks of injury, the great, deep, black eyes looked appealingly into mine, and the full lips whispered:

"Pa-pers!—Times!—Ledger!—Record!—Pre——" but the neck stiffened, the eyes closed, and the head fell heavily against my shoulder. The boy had fainted.

For one moment the busy city life stood still, as we passed to the sidewalk through the opening made by the policeman. Then, almost cruelly, it seemed to me, the sated, curious eyes thoughtlessly turned away, and the throng passed on, heedless of the nearness of the black-winged angel.

Not so I. There was something very winsome about this waif of humanity, thus strangely brought to my notice, as he lay unconscious in

my arms, and even as I bore him to the pavement, where a carriage was soon summoned, the helplessness of the little body, so animated a moment before, appealed to me so strongly that I determined he should be well cared for. Then, and possibly for the first time, was I really delighted that I was a staff member of a hospital in which he could be placed. I had been hurrying to a clinic at the time of the accident, and to the hospital I and my burden were swiftly driven.

The contrast between strength and weakness; between powerfulness and powerlessness; between vigorous manhood and maimed boyhood, was never so apparent to me as during that ride. There was much opportunity to study the small face, lying so pale in my arms, for the ride was long. The neck, straight and strong, supported a nobly

proportioned heed; the chin, square and compact, denoted tenaciousness of purpose; but this was somewhat softened, but by no means weakened, by the full, rich, delicately curved lips, resting, half parted on small, white, even teeth; the nose was perfect, and the line of Grecian beauty was clearly marked; the cheeks, however, were lacking in the roundness and flush of happy, cherished childhood, and a thrill of regret passed through me as I continued to gaze at the still unconscious lad; thick, wavy hair rolled in uncut profusion over a broad, high forehead; long, black lashes rested softly on the slightly hollow cheeks, while the delicate contour of the straight brows denoted

gentle blood. Even as my mind began to weave a possible history, colored by romance, for my waif, the eyes opened, soft, lustrous, dreamy, black, but now marred by the gleam of delirium.

"Pa - pers!—Rec – ord!—Times!—Press!—S - i - r - r - r."

There was a strong effort to rise; the muscles tightened to meet the demand of the will, but nature demurred at this tax upon her strength, and once more sweet unconsciousness blessed the boy.

When we arrived at the hospital, willing arms relieved me of my burden and carried him to a vacant cot, where he was soon tenderly laid. While waiting for his return to consciousness, the extent of his injuries was ascertained. Dark, ugly bruises were on arms and legs, while his right

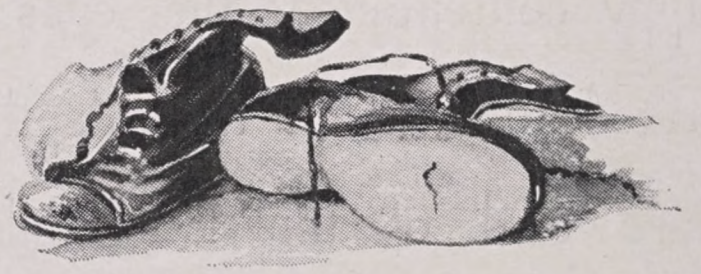
shoulder was much lacerated. These wounds were bathed, cleansed, and carefully dressed, ere consciousness returned, and the great eyes opened. When they rested on the white walls, a glance of half-incredulous delight passed over them as they wandered to the long windows, the neatly gowned nurse, and the coverlet. One hand stole slowly from beneath, and almost lovingly drifted about on the spread. This feeling acquaintance lasted some moments, during which varied expressions flitted over the small features. Finally, with a happy contentment, the eyes sought my face and rested there. In their depths one could see the pure soul of the lad, while refinement spoke in every tone of his musical voice.

Before I turned away, very loth I must confess to leave him, I asked how he was feeling.

"I am all right, sir," he replied, with well-assumed brightness. But pain crept into his voice as he added a moment later: "Tony is so tired."

"Sleep will rest you," I returned, as I moved away. However, the eyes of the lad held me, while he asked with the forethought which is the great legacy of the poor:

"And the—papers, sir—were they—all—sold?"



II

A BOY'S POWER

THAT evening, in the solitude of my den, from amid the bristling pages of a German treatise on neurotics, a small, dark, bright face would look wistfully at me. For half an hour or more I stolidly read on, but my mind would not become interested in the book before me. Do what I would I saw the boy's image. Relinquishing my book in disgust, I went to the piano and ran

my fingers over the keys. Half-unwittingly I played "La Somnambula," but chiming in with the melodious chords rang the words: "Pa-pers! —Times!—Ledger!—Press!—Record!" Going to my desk, I determined to force the thought of the lad from me by industriouly writing at my paper for the Psychological Society. But despite my efforts at concentration, the sheets seemed fairly alive with lustrous black eyes, full, red lips, or the memory-painted picture of a prostrate little figure and prancing steeds. Notwithstanding all my endeavors to thrust entirely from me the occurrences of the day, they mocked me by departing, but only to return with redoubled power.

I had always declared my utter disbelief in anything occult, and as stoutly affirmed that will-power would accomplish all things. But, as if

made of sand, my theories fell before the oft-recurring memory of Tony's personality. The impression gaining in intensity rather than diminishing by the passing of time, I at last concluded to forego the enjoyment of my den and return to the hospital where lay my waif.

The night never seemed so beautiful. The great dome of the heavens was studded with glittering stars, "the angels' peep-holes," as my little niece used to call them, among which "Cassiopeia" was clearly discernible. As I looked at the vastness above me my heart thrilled with the thought that God, who was greater than infinity, more enduring than time, was yet interested in the "very least of these.'

Sweet thoughts of vanished possibilities made my heart very tender toward Tony as I walked

on, and half-formed wishes created strange havoc in my brain.

As I entered the ward and neared the little cot, in strains of sweetest music came the witching melody of "Annie Laurie." The tones were surpassingly delightful in their power to please, and wondering, I paused to listen. Very soft and clear, but unfalteringly perfect, came the air, and the very atmosphere seemed loth to pass it along. While the last note was dying lingeringly away, "Come into the Garden, Maud." floated across the ward to where I stood. It was low and penetratingly melodious, and possessed of an ever-present power to charm, besides being one of my favorites. Determined to know the source of such delight, I passed softly on, moving carefully lest a footfall might mar the

harmony. I half guessed, or perhaps intuitively felt, that such sounds could come but from one person within those walls—Tony. Nor was my surmise at fault.

Nearing his bed I saw the eyes upraised, the face covered with a halo of ecstacy, while the puckered lips testified to the storehouse whence the treasure so lavishly rang forth. The whistling continued, low and sweet, as if he was oblivious to his surroundings, and I, in perfect delight, stood drinking it in in rich draughts. I have always enjoyed whistling next to the tones of the violin, and Tony was a "past grand master" of the art.

As the last notes died away, a slight stir caused him to recall his position, and with an air of naive surprise, the eyes dropped and resting on

me smiled. Never in all my experience among children have I seen such expressive eyes; not a muscle of the face needed to move, or the lips to open, for there was an easily translated language in these wonderful "windows of the soul." They said more than many children ever thought.

Drawing near, and bending close over him, I softly asked him how he was.

Quickly came the answer, but the voice was weak, and very different from that of the bright morning, "I am all right!" But the tones belied the words, and pain asserted itself, in spite of the brave will of the lad, and after a momentary struggle, he added: "I am all–right, but doctor–when the–pain comes–I have–to whistle! –I forgot–sometimes–to-day–but somehow the–music–just comes!–For-g-i-v-e!"

The unwonted brightness of the large eyes denoted fever, and taking the limp hand in mine I found that the pulse was phenomenally high. It was very evident that he must sleep, and in sweet oblivion forget his pain, and rest. Summoning the nurse with a nod, I sent her for a sleeping potion, and soon the brightness

was veiled by the tired lids, the head rested easily on the pillow, and in a few moments Tony was wandering among the beauties of the never fully discovered Land of Dreams. I watched the sleeping boy for some time, and my heart went out more strongly to him as he lay there in his

weakness. I was passionately fond of children, but I knew then that no young voices would ever enter my home, or little forms cluster around my knee, or— But that memory is too sacred, even after these long years, to touch, ever so slightly. It is a happiness which has been buried, along with other hopes, in the past. But I did not intend to speak of that.

In spite of the lateness of the hour, I remained at the side of the boy, long into the night watches, and only left when I remembered the tax the dawning day would make upon my strength.

Early in the morning I was again at my post beside the little cot. The winsome face, which in the short hours since I first had seen it had grown very dear to me, was now white and

drawn, but the eyes were more clearly seen through the veil of pain which yet remained over them, and they tendered me a right royal welcome.

"And how is the little man this morning?" I asked. "If whistling could cure great bruises, he certainly ought to be well."

"I am all right, sir." Never did Tony allow himself to acknowledge that he was otherwise than "all right." I have seen him when the little form was quivering with pain, or on the operating table, when it was impossible to administer an anodyne, and with bright eyes, he would declare, softly it is true, but emphatically, "I am all right, sir!" Sometimes he would admit that he was weary of remaining in a certain position, but I have always thought that he must have some

of the old, brave Spartan blood coursing through his delicate veins, for he abhorred pain, and never allowed it to master him. The struggle was sometimes severe, but Tony and his indomitable will always came out the victors. And on this morning, after his usual declaration, he added, and I remember so well, for it was the only admission his lips made of weariness or possible pain during the weeks of his illness and convalescence: "Doctor—could I be moved—just a little? I think the bed—does not like—me to stay—in one position—so long—for it—gets tired!"

I lifted him tenderly, and as he looked his thanks, for the effort of the other little speech had quite exhausted him, I said:

"Whistle all you want to, little man. The others will think it is a canary."

His eyes laughed a bright reply, and hardly were the gleams of their mirth passed away, when I was greeted with the never-to-grow-old favorite, "Listen to the Mocking Bird," and the way that lad, as he lay on his bed of pain as I well knew, trilled and warbled, caroled and mimicked the liquid tones of the bird, was something beyond my power to portray. Even after these years, if I pause a moment I can hear, resounding through the halls of memory, the strains as no one else could ever whistle them. Tony's whistling was something peculiar to himself, and one of his greatest accomplishments, and something of which I have never wearied. In the evenings, while the mantle of night was folding the world, I have loved to sit before the cheery grate-fire, surrounded with nothing pertain-

ing to the work of the day, and listen to my "nightingale," and rest. But, they tell me, as people grow old they lose the power of consecutive thought, and in telling a story will wander off, here and there, in the fields of reminiscence, and forget that what interests them is of little moment to others. But age is something which comes to all, and we then live in the past, rather than the future, as children do, or the present, as the youth and maiden do, and are content.

Where was I?

Oh, I remember.

After the permission had been given, and so delightfully accepted, all through the ward the faces, tired with the daily conflict with pain, brightened and heads and eyes turned to see, if possible, whence the melody came.

During my customary rounds, many other airs were whistled, and now and then some patient asked for a favorite; the message was conveyed to Tony, who was delighted that his exorcism could also control others, and well pleased was he to grant the various requests. The fund of melodies with which that lad's throat was stored was certainly remarkable, for as I recall that day, nothing for which he was asked was unfamiliar to him. Toward the last of my rounds, a weak, paralyzed old man, with great effort, whispered the plea that he might hear the "Land o' the Leal" once more. The accents of boyhood had returned to his lips, and once again, but only in thought, he was wandering, care-free and buoyant, over the heaths of "Bonnie Scotland," humming the minor air for which he asked, and

which, in its very self, proclaimed the dear, strong, rugged land of his nativity, as truly as did the quaint speech of the highlands.

I, myself, bore this request to Tony. The wonderful eyes contracted, and a spasm of pain, not physical, as I could easily recognize, passed over the delicate features. His lips were tightly compressed for a moment, and his eyes closely shut. Then the soul, looking through the speaking eyes, determined to be strong, and scoffed at that which had caused the momentary convulsion of pain, and the weird, plaintive air trembled on the stillness. Now and then the echo of a half sob mingled with the melody, and added to the touching effect. As the whistling progressed, Tony's eyes closed, and I, as I watched him closely, saw two great tears steal from under the

long lashes, and wander over the cheek, finally losing themselves in the sweetness of the lad's self. Bravely, however, did he whistle to the close, then opening his eyes, which were full of repressed tears, silently pleaded with me for a respite.

Later in the morning, while dressing the bruises, which were exceedingly painful, Tony kept his eyes closed, and his lips tightly shut. As I finished my task, he remarked, apologetically as though but a moment had elapsed since his whistling had ceased:

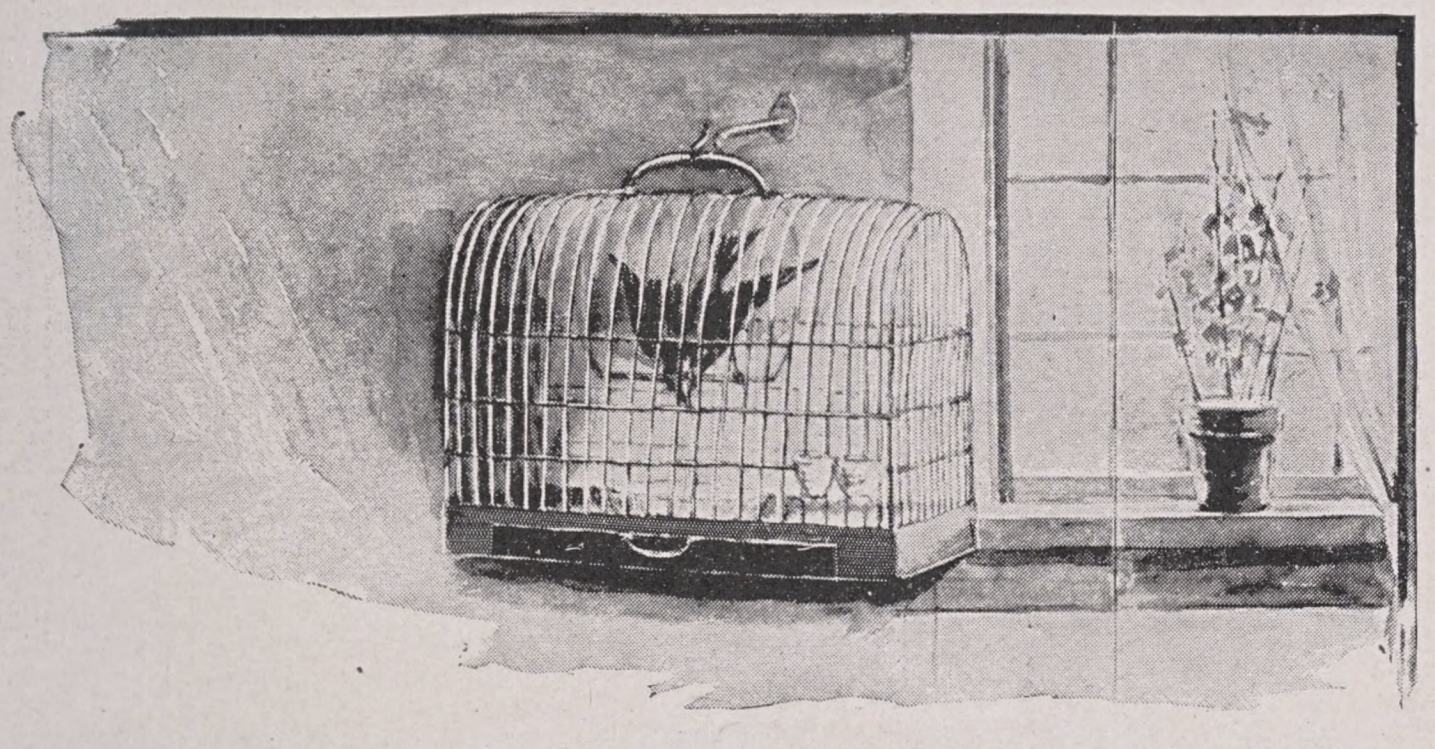
"It was the last thing 'she' sang. It brings it all back to me so clearly. Oh, my Dearchen!"

By some mysterious power we understood each other perfectly. Our conversations, in all

probability, would not have been understood by another overhearing them, but they were intelligible to us, however erratic they might seem to be. And thus instinctively I knew to what and whom "she" referred, and by his simple words I easily read his life-story, a desperate struggle with memory, and a brave triumph over repressed pain and longing.

III

THE RIVALS



TONY'S gentle ways and wordless music had endeared him to the attendants, most of whom had become so familiar with the sight and sound of pain as to grow almost indifferent to it. But one and all had a pleasant smile for the lad, and when waiting on him, were almost unconsciously more careful, and every movement was full of that peculiar tenderness belonging to the skilled hand. In Tony's very presence was a charm, which lingered with one after leaving, and which I can liken only to that nameless pleasure derived

from the contemplation of one of nature's "chefs-d'œuvre," or the memory of the joy when communing with one's highest self.

Every day I looked forward to seeing and hearing Tony, and would leave him to the last that I might remain longer with him. He would watch for my first entrance, and ere the noiseless door was half opened the witching strains of "Come into the Garden, Maud," would fill the long, plain, white, cot-filled ward, and every face would show signs of unmistakable pleasure. The patients soon learned to wait for my coming with considerable eagerness, for the autocratic Tony persistently refused to whistle before seeing me. And then, while I and my attendant were making our rounds through the ward, the atmosphere seemed flooded with music, and the eyes of

the little wizard who created all the harmony fairly danced with delight.

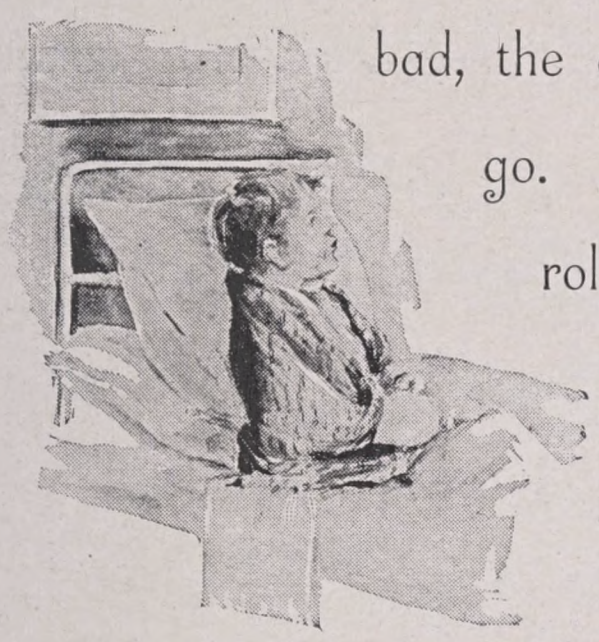
I remember one morning as I sat with his little hand in mine, while the nurse was holding a glass of water, that we were both slightly startled by the report of an explosion—one of those involuntary movements to which even the best trained are subject. It in itself would not be worth mentioning, had not the nurse dropped the glass on Tony's bruised arm. For an instant my heart was still with fear for the lad's pain. But hardly had a moment elapsed ere clear and sweet rang out the inspiring tones of the glorious "Battle Hymn of the Republic"—that song which aroused and fired men's hearts when the nation stood imperilled.

Knowing something of what the pain must be

resultant from such a blow, for in effect it was that, I inwardly wondered more than ever at the remarkable bravery of the boy, and the celerity with which his lips, visibly quivering with pain, opened, but to give utterance to the grand old hymn. His face did pale for an instant and the eyes lose part of their brilliancy. But as my clasp of his hand tightened and the sympathy I, man as I was, could not then express in words was thus conveyed to him, the eyes—it is impossible to refrain from references to Tony's eyes, for as I have already written, they were truly wonderful in their wide range of expressiveness—brightened and the rigidity of the set features relaxed, and with a half-returning smile, he looked up and declared softly, "I am all right!"

I went on with my work and inwardly trem-

bled lest anything else should befall the boy, but succeeded in hiding my feelings. I did not hurry, for it was not only a great pleasure to be near him but a greater one to be doing something for him. But at last, as to all things good and bad, the end came, and I arose to go. As I walked away, the rollicking strains of "Nancy Lee" floated toward me and literally seemed to encircle me and force me to think of the happy, care-free life of the jolly tars.



Another day, for some reason or other, the dressing was again very painful, and again expression was stifled by the uplifting air of the old hymn, which rang out clear and sweet.

This song was Tony's battle cry. It was only whistled when there was a demand for it; never at other times.

This time, when the bandages were replaced, with very tender hands, for we all pitied and admired the lad at the same time, the words came in a much stronger voice, but not yet like the pure melody when I first heard it:

"I could not help it, sir! I always whistle it when the pain comes. I even whistled it, but oh, so soft, sir, when—when—she—when she—!" But the sentence was lost in the notes of the hymn, which seemed to express so much to Tony.

It was remarkable, considering the presumable position and environment of the lad, to hear the pure English in which he spoke. During all the weeks of his illness and confinement to the

hospital I never noticed an error or grammatical inelegance in his conversation. It was but natural for me to sometimes speculate as to the parentage of my lad and the causes which brought him where he was. A lad of his promise seemed fitted to brighten some palatial home or bloom as the choicest blossom of some noble family, but my curiosity, if such it really was, was destined but to be disappointed. He was never to me anything but "Tony," and I loved him for himself, ignorant alike of blood and training, but satisfied that both were of the best.

It was about this time that a mocking bird was placed in the ward in which Tony was by some philanthropically inclined woman who was interested in the hospital on general principles. For you must know I was selfish about this lad

of mine, and demanded the right that he was to be interviewed by no one except myself and the attendants. I was really a trifle jealous of his favor. How I wish it was in my power, in the power of any one, to convey an adequate idea of the contests that arose between these whistlers; the duets, the arias, the merry trillings, untranslatable to paper. The bird seemed to enjoy it fully as much as the lad near him, and they together contributed much to the pleasure of those who heard them. In their melody the sway of the master-pain was for the moment lessened, and the listeners revelled in the sounds as they issued from the rivals.

Whenever the mocking bird would complete a lay after I had appeared—for Tony still adhered to his determination to be silent until I came, and

during this time the mocking bird tried all the dainty coquetries in his power to arouse Tony to emulate his example, but the lad remained obdurate—from the cot would come a perfect echo, and sometimes the listeners were deceived into thinking that the bird was repeating himself.

The feathered songster would listen, with head bent to one side and his bright little eyes fixed on Tony. He never stirred during the whistling, but as it was finished, with a quaint little shake, another roundelay would be poured forth; and then, with a self-satisfied finale, as much as to say, "You can't beat that, sir!" he would contentedly hop from perch to perch.

With dancing eyes Tony would preserve silence for a moment or two, just to give the bird a respite; but he was always doomed to disap-

pointment, for the invalid's chief delight seemed to be to endeavor to surpass his instructor, and I must confess that it was hard to decide which was the victor.

And so the hours were filled.

And many days passed, each bringing its wealth of sound and lavishly using it for the pleasure of others. However, in spite of all my care, the efforts of the faithful attendants, and the fact that the bruises were almost healed, Tony did not seem to be gaining strength as I had expected. His face continued pale, and even thin, and his eyes, though comparatively bright, always appeared weary.

One morning, about three weeks after he had been injured, as usual I left him until the last to receive attention. For some reason he was quite

silent and allowed the bird to warble undisturbed. I mentally commented upon it, but concluded he must be sleeping, and so thought no more of it. Nearing his cot I caught what seemed to be but the faint echo of the hymn, and the voice was moist with suppressed tears.

Quietly seating myself beside him, I tenderly caressed the small, white hand lying so listlessly on the coverlet, for I loved the boy as I would have loved a son. The whistling did not cease until the last note died regretfully away, and then, with a heart-sick expression, painful in one so yaung, he said softly:

"Doctor, you have been so good to me. I never could say how good, sir. But—but—I want to go to her. Oh, doctor, she was all the world to me, little 'Mutterchen' was. And we

were so happy together, even if we were very poor. I am all alone, and—and—I want to go

to the 'Land o' the Leal'—to her!"

Tony was a brave fellow and could endure

physical pain, as I have said, without a murmur, very often to my unbounded surprise and admiration. He always succeeded in "whistling it off," as he said, and the hymn meant more to him than prayers to many. He was small and delicate looking, but his will power was strong and of finest quality, and everything about him constantly forced one to the conclusion that he was of gentle birth. His heart hunger—so rarely expressed and yet gaining in intensity because of the very repression—for her, I could sympathize with, for my better self had too passed to the "Land o' the Leal," and I was alone.

Obeying an impulse, entirely unpremeditated, and for which I have never ceased to give thanks, I leaned over, and lifting the slight form in my arms, whispered:

"Tony, lad, we are both all alone. Won't you get well and strong and be my boy? I want you so much, Tony; for laddie, I love you."

Perhaps it was an unusal plea for a disciple of Æsculapius to make, but love is the master-key to all barred doors, and our hearts beat in sympathy, too deep and strong for ready expression. The glorious light in the eyes of my lad answered me, and the sweet lips, so much sweeter to me then than a moment before, assumed their usual pucker, and "The Heart Bowed Down" was a fitting chord by which to express what we could not put into words—just then.

As I listened I wondered why I had not thought of this delightful plan long before, and revelled in the new joy that had come to me, promising to make my life bright and happy by its

presence. For some moments neither of us spoke, but our hands and eyes communed with each other, as I have always fondly thought no other hands and eyes could do. Forgetful of the flight of time, I watched the lad, my lad now, and was content.

But time was, and ever will be inexorable, and would not tarry even for such happy ones as we were, and the moments sped away, following each other with unimagined rapidity, or so it seemed to me, for I was so happy in the present.

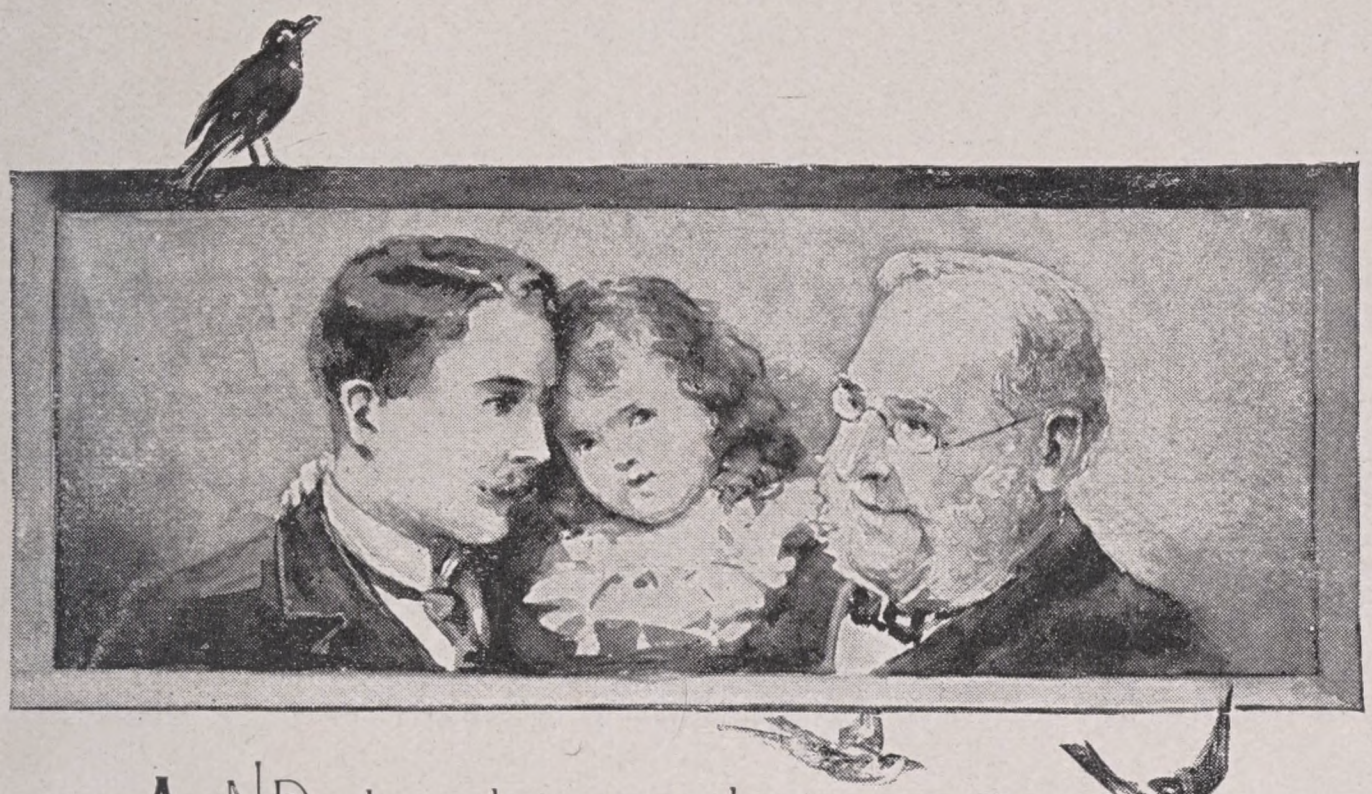
"And Tony," I whispered jubilantly, as I determined I must go, "you will hurry and get well—this very afternoon? For to-morrow we will leave for the country, where all the woods are green and where you will grow strong and rosy. You are my boy now, dear lad, and you

will try and grow to be worthy of her. Good bye."

And all the answer Tony made was by whistling, for the first time, the majestic, joy-pervaded "Italian Hymn."

IV

THE TRIO



AND thus the years have passed. Tony and I always together, complete in each other—at least we have thought so.

And now, even as I write, the sound of a whistling trio greets my ear, and it is the same old hymn, which meant so much to the little waif of the past, and which has clung to him in all his wanderings. For you must know that Tony is my partner now, and in our home and around my knees, challenging my great love for their father, are two diminutive whistlers, who conquer pain by the same, dear old battle cry.

But, as I listen the sound comes nearer. It is in the hall—at my door. And then, with shining faces, and whistling the best-loved hymn, sending it pealing forth like a clarion cry of victory, the trio enters. After an unprecedented and unrepeatable trill on the last bar, Maid Dorothy declares, with her bright eyes all aglow —those eyes with the father's own expressiveness:

"Drandpa, de hymn drawed my toof out! Tony wistled it, and de toof comed out, and me didn't ky, not one 'ittle bit! Did me, papa?"

The younger Tony creeps into my arms, as my lad used to do in the days long passed, and in his own insinuating way, pleads:

"Grandpa, please tell us how papa came to you, to be your little boy, and how he whistled

our hymn when he felt bad? Do, grandpa, that's a dear!"

And who could withstand such lips and eyes? I cannot, and as my writing is just finished I read to them, the story I have told so often, of how my little boy came to me. This audience never grows weary of the same tale, but demands it day after day.

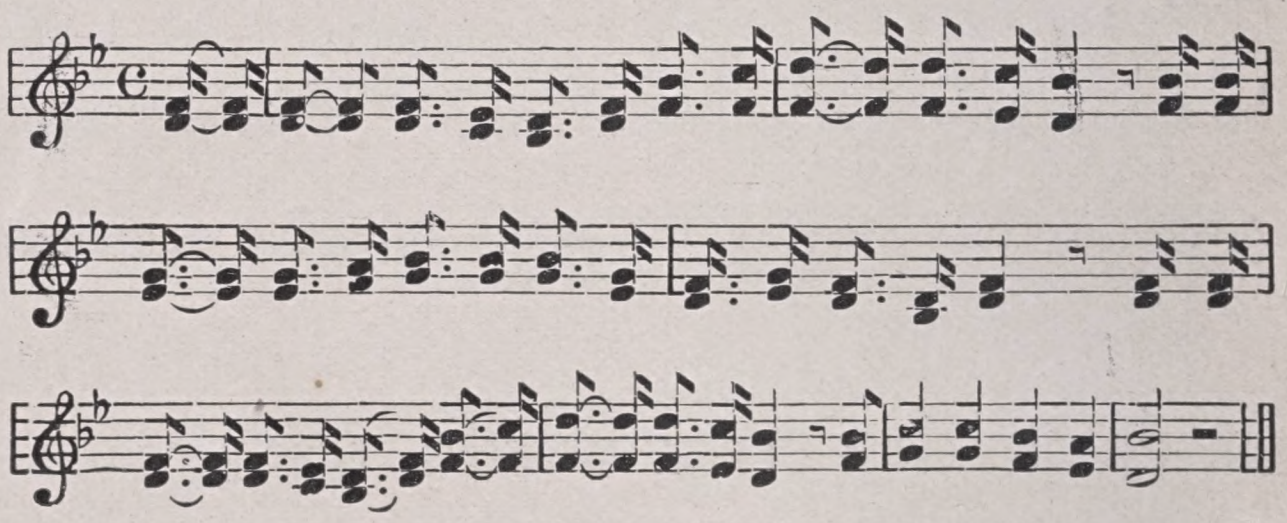
At its close Tony remarks, sagely, as he always does:

"Maid Dorothy, let us be like papa when we feel bad, or the pain comes? Let us always whistle the Hymn, and never anything else."

Nothing loth, and ever ready to second his suggestions, comes the oft-repeated, sweetly lisped reply:

"Es, me will. Let's."

And while I thank the good God for my son Tony, my little lad, and these precious ones who brighten our home, and who are so dear to us all, they whistle happily, as they sit on my knees.



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